



## **An Interview with Lindsay Anderson**

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PETER COWIE

## An Interview with Lindsay Anderson

*Lindsay Anderson, whose first feature, THIS SPORTING LIFE, appeared last year, has been noted for his work in various fields, including film criticism and documentary. He was one of the founder-editors of SEQUENCE in 1947, and began writing and directing industrial films in 1948. Among his best known short films are WAKEFIELD EXPRESS, THURSDAY'S CHILDREN, O DREAMLAND and EVERY DAY EXCEPT CHRISTMAS. He has also worked in the theater, where his productions have included THE LONG AND THE SHORT AND THE TALL, SERGEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE, BILLY LIAR, THE FIRE RAISERS, and THE DIARY OF A MADMAN. Most recently he has directed the London production of Max Frisch's ANDORRA at the National Theatre.*

*Is there any connection between the theatrical revival that started in British theater with Look Back in Anger in 1956, and the resurgence of the British cinema a year or two later?*

Of course there is. Most immediately because both "revivals" were signalled by the same work—Tony Richardson's production of John Osborne's play at the Royal Court in 1956, and his direction of the film version a year later. Probably the development was inevitable anyway, since the time was historically ripe for a break-through of both creative and social activity in the flabby, exhausted atmosphere of postwar Britain. It happened first in the theater, probably because it is easier to experiment with a play than with a film. The finance involved is not so vast, and new talent is more readily acceptable. In fact, there was strong pressure against the employment of Tony Richardson to direct *Look Back in Anger*, and Associated British were only forced to accept him by the intransigence of John Osborne. (Similarly they had refused to consider the idea of my directing the film version of *The Long and the Short and the Tall*, as they had refused to accept the idea of Peter O'Toole playing the leading role which he had brilliantly created on the stage.) A further fillip was given to the movement by the success of Jack Clayton's first full-length film, *Room at the Top*, and by the even greater success in Britain of Karel

Reisz with *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. This last film, which owed its existence again to Tony Richardson and John Osborne, who imposed both Karel Reisz and Albert Finney on a reluctant industry, really and finally dispelled the prejudice against new talent in British films.

*How did you manage to set up This Sporting Life?*

I didn't. The production of this film was really a miracle. Although I had suggested it originally as a subject to Tony Richardson, who wanted me to direct a film for Woodfall, it was eventually bought by the Rank Organization to be made by Julian Wintle's Independent Artists. I think their idea was that the novel could make another *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*; and this is why it was offered to Karel Reisz. But Karel did not want to make another *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and he was anxious to get experience on the production side. So he offered to produce the film if I were given it to direct. Much to my surprise Julian Wintle agreed, and so we made the picture under extremely good conditions, and without having to go through the tortuous ordeal of setting it up.

*Why is it that scarcely any British directors write their own scripts, in the way that many French directors are able to?*

## ANDERSON

Lindsay  
Anderson  
directing  
Richard  
Harris and  
Rachel  
Roberts



In the first place it is something of a myth that directors on the Continent always write their own scripts. Truffaut, for instance, works with writers and his last two films have been adapted from novels. Resnais is also extremely literary in his approach to film-making—and even Antonioni works with writers, though certainly from his own ideas. I think the dependence of the British directors on novels or plays arises partly from the much greater difficulty in this country of setting up pictures, and the fact that producers and distributors are more likely to accept subjects that have already proved themselves in another medium. This certainly inhibits one from setting out to write an original script. Whether there is also a more basic “literary attitude” on the part of British artists is a question I should like to see critics discuss with discernment.

*Did you find the reception of This Sporting Life encouraging?*

Yes and no. In general the critical response was extremely good; though I was interested, if not terribly surprised, to find that “highbrows” tended to be noticeably less enthusiastic than ordinary, sensitive people. Our bad reviews came from snob papers like *The Times*, *The Manchester Guardian*, *The New Statesman* and *The Spectator*—precisely, in fact, from those critics who are always moaning that the British cinema cannot achieve the same “artistry” as

the New Waves of France and Italy. England—or rather intellectual England—has not changed so very much, and there is still the prejudice against direct and large-scale emotional statement that crippled and exiled a writer like D. H. Lawrence. But, taking a larger view, I found the response to the film extremely gratifying, particularly when one bears in mind its harshness and its uncompromising emotional demands. Ten years ago it is impossible to imagine such a film achieving a full circuit release in Britain.

*Do you feel that the present system of distribution and exhibition in Britain needs overhauling?*

Most emphatically. From a purely economic point of view, the domination of exhibition by the two powerful combines of Rank and A.B.C. is certainly most pernicious—and I wish that the critics of artistically pretentious reviews like *Sight and Sound* could bring themselves to admit the relationship between these intractable economic realities, and the creative daydreams in which they so naively indulge.

And apart from the economics of the case, this petrification of the system of exhibition means that the whole business of showing films remains obstinately and disastrously out of date. It is the distributors and the exhibitors who are behind the times, not the film-makers. Films continue to be handled and publicized and shown almost exactly as they were

thirty years ago. If anything rather worse, since the cinemas are older and the people who run them are more defeatist. There is certainly a new public for good films, and one which could be made to yield profitable business. Unfortunately distributors and exhibitors are so lacking in vitality that they can think only in terms of immense and unshakable profits from spectacular blockbusters. In this respect the British cinema is lagging far behind the Americans—there is absolutely no equivalent here to the art theater chain in the US, which has developed so marvellously in the last few years.

*How do you explain what some critics have called "The obsession with the lower classes and the North of England" in so many recent British films?*

I regard such phrases as journalistic jargon, impossible to discuss very seriously. Britain remains so obstinately and unprofitably class-conscious that it is still impossible to make a film without the social level of its characters being the first consideration. Of course this is ridiculous.

*But you won't deny that there has at least been a shift in subject matter and social approach in the best of recent British films?*

Undoubtedly—and largely for social-historical reasons—the most vital writings of the past several years in Britain has come from writers of working-class origin, and astonishingly many of these have come from the industrial midlands and the North. David Storey, Alan Sillitoe, Shelagh Delaney, John Arden, Stan Barstow, John Braine, Willis Hall and Keith Waterhouse . . . . The same, incidentally, is true of our young actors: Albert Finney from Lancashire, Tom Courtenay and Peter O'Toole from Yorkshire, Tom Bell from Liverpool. Naturally this has resulted in a shift from the almost exclusively middle-class, suburban concern of the pre-1956 British cinema. But only a small number of these books or films have been primarily "social" in their approach. Unfortunately most of the critics and the journalists who write about them remain bourgeois either by origin or by ambition; and undoubtedly they see this new tradition as something of a threat. Defensively they falsify what they see, and hasten to create by the use of quite inaccurate labels ("kitchen-sink," "working-class realism," etc.) a phoney image which they can easily destroy. The persistent falsification and denigration of these works by some critics is purely a domestic facet of the class-war. Do you remember any of them (or their like-minded predecessors) applying the same dismissive sneers to films like *La Bête Humaine*, *Le Jour se Lève*, *Two Pennyworth of*

*Hope*, or *On the Waterfront*? All of which were equally "obsessed with the lower classes". . .

*Do you like to work with actors, or would you prefer to use amateurs, like a number of Continental directors?*

I have no resentment of actors, if that's what you mean, in the manner of Bresson, Antonioni, etc. Acting at its best is a creative, fully expressive art; and I think that the tendency today to regard actors as unfortunately necessary pieces of furniture, to be manipulated and pushed around by the director, is very mistaken. When I read in a notice of *This Sporting Life* a phrase like "Anderson has 'managed to extract' powerful performances from Richard Harris and Rachel Roberts," I can only smile. This is an extraordinarily false idea of how such collaborations work. In fact the Frank Machin of the film is Richard Harris' creation—and a vital contribution to the whole personality of the picture. To work with artists of this caliber is enormously stimulating—much more so, to me, than trying to restrict them to the limits of one's own imagination.

*Is there any director who has had a particular influence on you? As regards technique I should have thought Resnais . . .*

I admire Resnais. I don't like his pictures very much, at least not so far, but that is a matter of taste. Certainly I think his daring and his rigor have helped many other directors (including myself) to break down the old shibboleths of "technique"—I mean the kind of faceless Hollywood narrative style that still represents to many technicians the only permissible way of telling a story on film. But the construction of *This Sporting Life* was not inspired by Resnais: it came more or less directly from the book. And much of the cutting style and the use of sound develops the style I used in documentaries years back, like *Wakefield Express* and *Every Day Except Christmas*—which no doubt showed the influence of Humphrey Jennings. And I think there's a sort of (unfashionable) directness and absoluteness in the way the characters are regarded that might recall John Ford . . . . But this game of "influences" is a tricky one, and perhaps better played by critics than by artists. I can tell you one thing: the spider didn't come from Bergman, but from the novel. And anyway I have never seen *Through a Glass Darkly*.

*Have you any plans for further work in the cinema?*

I am hoping to direct a new and more authentic version of *Wuthering Heights*. David Storey is doing the script, and Richard Harris will play Heathcliff.